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Book Reviews

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## Review of *Football and Manliness: An Unauthorized Feminist Account of the NFL* by Thomas P. Oates (University of Illinois Press)

Shannon O'Sullivan

**ABSTRACT** In 'Football and Manliness,' Thomas B. Oates offers a prescient intersectional feminist analysis of the central symbolic place of the National Football League in U.S. culture and politics. In each chapter, Oates provides close readings of various popular media texts, which, despite remaining secondary to the spectacle of televised games, profoundly shape the ideological work the NFL performs in relation to dominant constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. These texts include fictionalized cinematic and televised melodramas depicting the internal dynamics of professional football teams; sports media coverage of the NFL draft; self-help books authored by noted NFL coaches; computer-based games, including fantasy league football and Madden NFL; and lastly, the investigative reportage that ignited the NFL concussion scandal. As Oates succinctly posits, "these texts produce a complex but ultimately coherent set of stories about gender, race, and contemporary capitalism" (20).

*Football and Manliness: An Unauthorized Feminist Account of the NFL*. By Thomas P. Oates. Urbana, Chicago, & Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017, 232 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-252-08244-3. US List: \$25.95.

In *Football and Manliness*, Thomas B. Oates offers a prescient intersectional feminist analysis of the central symbolic place of the National Football League in US culture and politics. Oates' examination predates former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick silently protesting racial injustice and police brutality during pregame performances of the national anthem during the 2016 season. In September 2017, African-American players joined Kaepernick in droves by somberly taking a knee as the anthem played, partially in response to President Donald Trump's disparaging remarks rebuking African-American players' rights to free expression. The NFL player-led protests became part of the national conversation on race, police brutality, and free expression for weeks. Oates thoroughly evidences the hegemonic status of the NFL within the interlocking matrix of U.S. culture and politics, especially as it pertains to contested paragons of racialized masculinity and the promotion of shrewd, managerial thinking as a naturalized barometer of masculine prowess and authenticity. Considering the recent player-led protests, Oates' assertion that the NFL constitutes a "generative cultural space" (23) in the United States continues to gain widespread traction.

In the prologue, Oates connects the NFL's unrivaled contemporary popularity, in which the league's programming consistently garners top ratings despite an increasingly fractured television viewership, with Trump's unlikely ascent to the highest elected office in the United States. He identifies the NFL as a prominent, highly mediated, and increasingly disputed terrain upon which heteronormative white male anxieties about their perceived loss of status in relation to women, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified

individuals have played out in formative ways in recent years. In each chapter, Oates provides close readings of various popular media texts, which, despite remaining secondary to the spectacle of televised games, profoundly shape the ideological work the NFL performs in relation to dominant constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. These texts include fictionalized cinematic and televised melodramas depicting the internal dynamics of professional football teams; sports media coverage of the NFL draft; self-help books authored by noted NFL coaches; computer-based games, including fantasy league football and *Madden NFL*; and lastly, the investigative reportage that ignited the NFL concussion scandal. As Oates succinctly posits, “these texts produce a complex but ultimately coherent set of stories about gender, race, and contemporary capitalism” (20).

The first two chapters dissect the racial politics of the NFL, in which African-American players are simultaneously surveilled as threats to white male dominance and elevated as objects of desire for the white male gaze. In the first chapter, Oates unpacks how fictionalized film and television dramas centering on professional football reveal the dominant cultural imprint of white male anxieties arising from the inroads women and people of color have made toward equality in the preceding decades. Looking at the Oliver Stone film *Any Given Sunday* (1999), the ESPN dramatic series *Playmakers* (2003), and the USA series *Necessary Roughness* (2011–2013), Oates explicates how these dramatizations reinforce the perceived sanctity of white male supremacist homosocial spaces. Although 70 percent of the league’s players are Black, the coaching staff and key leadership-based player positions, such as quarterback, remain mostly occupied by white players. All three representations depict independent Black players eschewing homosocial conventions of humility and self-sacrifice, as they eclipse their white counterparts in on-field performance and occasionally off-field popularity. Oates pinpoints that portraying these Black players as initial threats to the disciplinary cohesion of their teams speaks to real-life concerns about the containment of Black masculinity in both sports and society. Despite some subversive interventions with the inclusion of strong women characters, Oates effectively argues that “these texts present a reactionary fantasy of professional football” (45).

In the second chapter, Oates focuses on NFL draft discourses. He traces and contextualizes the trajectory of sports media coverage of the draft from relative obscurity for decades to its status as a widely anticipated and media-saturated event. He asserts that the systematic assessment and commodification of Black male bodies during the draft echoes the legacy of slavery—placing his analysis in conversation with William Rhoden’s *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* and Anthony Prior’s *The Slave Side of Sunday*. He compellingly configures the discursive and looking practices of the draft as a racialized homoerotic site of straight, white male visual pleasure: “The draft’s ceremony of objectification may be read as a Black male pageant, judged by the white male gaze” (87).

The third and fourth chapters examine the NFL’s place within the wider neoliberal push for the normalization of managerial, financialized thinking as a marker of masculine authenticity and personal development. Oates positions the publication of multiple self-help books authored by NFL coaches, including Bill Walsh, Tom Coughlin, Pete Carroll, and Tony Dungy, as demonstrative of the widespread acceptance of a corporate culture where managers and workers are encouraged to view an organization’s goals as their own in pursuit of self-actualizing both ideal manhood and economic citizenship. The fourth chapter powerfully illustrates the role fantasy football leagues and the popular videogame franchise *Madden NFL* play in prompting male fans to perceive themselves as managers of players—deepening the dominant conceptualization of NFL players as commodities. Effective management of players, although imagined for entertainment,

serves to valorize the masculinity of these computer-based games' largely male participants.

Oates concludes with an assessment of the dominant narratives of the NFL concussion crisis, including the 2013 PBS *Frontline* documentary *League of Denial* and the 2015 film *Concussion*, starring Will Smith. He situates the concussion crisis as critically disrupting the NFL's hegemonic legitimation of white male anxieties in relation to their social position, its purveyance of neoliberal managerialism, and its relentless commodification of players.

Oates compellingly demonstrates the worthiness of the NFL as an urgent and productive site of scholarly inquiry within cultural studies. He appropriately historicizes and interweaves a wide array of media texts linking narratives of professional football to deeper cultural and political arenas of struggle. He also notes the tensions, contradictions, and elisions that are simultaneously present within this cogent set of discourses. Despite these strengths, Oates' analysis would have greatly benefitted from an engagement with the NFL's prominent circulation of prevailing logics of U.S. nationalism and militarism. From the NFL accepting money from the Department of Defense for its highly orchestrated pregame performances of the national anthem and military flyovers<sup>1</sup> to its "Salute to Service" public relations campaign paired with military camouflage merchandise, the league actively bolsters U.S. exceptionalism and military imperialism. Investigating the linkage between the glorification of militarism and hegemonic masculinity within the context of the NFL would have added an integral layer to Oates' examination. Building upon this line of reasoning, Oates work would be further complemented by an inspection of NFL media discourses originating from outside U.S. borders. The league annually hosts games in London and Mexico City, indicating its increasingly transnational reach.

Oates emphasizes that the NFL and its related popular media texts are not merely reflective of politics, but dynamic drivers of dominant perceptions of race, gender, and class. This claim has only been further buoyed by Colin Kaepernick and other African-American players' anthem-related acts of resistance. Given the increasing contingency of the NFL as a result of the concussion crisis, it seems more probable than ever that Oates' intersectional feminist vision of undermining the NFL's hegemony will be realized.

## Notes

1. Melanie Schmitz, "How the NFL sold Patriotism to the U.S. Military for Millions." *ThinkProgress*, September 25, 2017. <https://thinkprogress.org/nfl-dod-national-anthem-6f682cebc7cd/> ↗

 Bio



### Shannon O'Sullivan

Shannon O'Sullivan is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Green Mountain College. O'Sullivan earned her doctorate in Media Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2017. During her time at CU, she also completed graduate certificates in Comparative Ethnic Studies and Women and Gender Studies. Her interdisciplinary research interests focus on investigating the relationships between media, public policies, and the reproduction and resistance of social injustices.



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